

AFRICAN ART



THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART • MUSEUM NEWS

AFRICAN TRIBAL ART

This publication introduces a new element in the Museum's collections—a recently opened gallery of the Art of Africa. While the Museum has for more than fifteen years owned and exhibited examples of African art, it has only now acquired enough to form a gallery solely devoted to the art of this vast continent.

African art objects are appropriate to this Museum and to our community for several reasons. First, these objects have been carefully chosen for their intrinsic significance of form; that is, for their qualities as works of art. Second, they offer us an understanding of the traditions and backgrounds of a substantial segment of the population of our country. Third, African art had a profound effect upon Western art of the first part of this century. If we are to understand certain phases of modern art, we must know the art of Africa.

While the Impressionist painters of the 1870's were influenced in their composition and perspective by Japanese prints which had been introduced into Europe as humble wrapping paper on imports from the Orient, the art of Picasso, Braque, Modigliani, Vlaminck and others was influenced by African artifacts brought to Europe as curiosities by traders in the early 20th century.

These African works of art are generally of no great age. Insects, adverse climate and ritual use have caused the destruction of nearly all objects made before the end of the 19th century. However, tribal cultures usually produce little variation in type. We can assume that these objects, whatever their age, represent ancient forms preserved by tradition, within narrow artistic limits.

All objects in this issue were acquired with funds bequeathed by Edward Drummond Libbey.

Otto Wittmann, Director

*Cover (front and back)
Reliquary Figure
Wood with brass, copper and iron sheeting
Bakota Tribe, Gabon
Ht. 20 in. (50.8 cm.)
73.10*

INTRODUCTION

Most of the masks and figure sculpture of Africa were produced in an area which extends in a broad belt some 3,000 miles across Africa south of the Sahara. It is noteworthy that the production of these works is confined to only one part of this vast continent.

This region is watered by two great river systems, the Niger and the Congo, which furnish conditions not only for natural vegetation but also for the cultivation of crops in the rain forests and grasslands. These conditions favored communities organized around the raising of crops and domesticated animals. Organized, settled communities were the setting in which crafts could develop. Timber was readily available for the production of carved and decorated doors and structural posts, as well as masks and other sculpture. The variety of materials available other than wood—metal, plant fibers, shells, feathers, beads—used by these craftsmen shows their resourcefulness and imagination.

The mere availability of materials does not, however, explain their use. The social structure of the people living in this part of Africa was an important factor in the development of crafts. The basic social unit that developed in this area was the tribe, whose members lived in villages and towns. The tribe shared a common language, social and political institutions and religious beliefs.

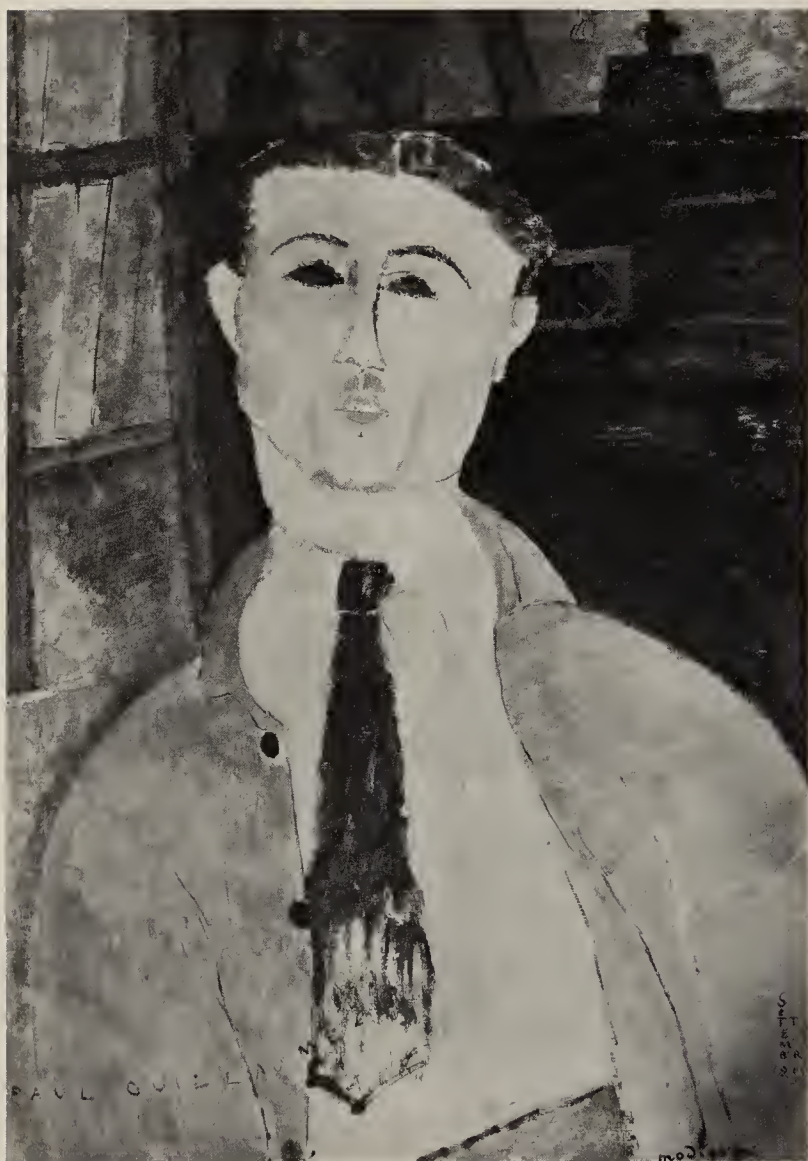
The rituals and ceremonies that developed around these traditions led to the production of images which embody tribal beliefs. Furthermore, in a society where oral tradition was the main source of tribal beliefs and customs, the images helped to make tribal beliefs understandable and thereby widely accepted. The annual initiation rites of the young as adults into tribal life provided not only a basis for the expression of tribal unity, but

also required the production of such objects as masks, headdresses and vessels. In a sense, these objects also served as visual aids in the education of the young.

Each village had its own craftsman or group of craftsmen who met their community's need for ritual objects. These artisans made traditional objects in the established style of the tribe, and occasionally introduced new objects and forms. There was wide variety in the quality of these objects. The fact that an object was not expertly carved did not lessen its spiritual power. The religious purpose of these objects points to the fact that their appreciation as works of art is a purely western concept, foreign to tribal life.

When a member of the tribe wore a mask, he was recognized as assuming a new identity, that of the spirit of the mask. Masks which were worn on top of the head and those which extended above the face of the mask gave the figure of the wearer a larger-than-life presence. With a costume covering the wearer's body, and with a raffia fringe concealing the transition from the mask to the body, the dancer became an imposing, super-human being whose presence commanded awe and respect.

It was the artists of France and later Germany in the first years of the 20th century who first made Europeans aware of the expressive power of African carving. They began to collect these masks and figures and to study the African collections in the ethnographic museums of Berlin, Dresden, London, Rome and Paris. The work of Pablo Picasso, Andre Derain, Amedeo Modigliani and Maurice Vlaminck (who owned the Fang mask, fig. 12), among others, shows an immediate response to the power, dynamism and abstracted simplicity which these artists recognized in African pieces



1. Amedeo Modigliani, French (1884-1920)
 Portrait of Paul Guillaume, 1915
 Oil on board, 29½ x 20½ in. (74.9 x 52.1 cm.)
 51.382
 Gift of Mrs. C. Lockhart McKelvy

they saw. The effect of these works on the development of 20th century western art is now recognized as significant.

A portrait of the art dealer Paul Guillaume by Amedeo Modigliani in the Toledo collection (fig. 1) is an example of African influence on French art of this period. The face of the sitter is presented as if it were a mask even to the eyes being made to resemble cut out eye openings. Unlike the blank eye spaces, the mouth is filled with teeth, a feature often present in African carvings. Modigliani's style of flattening forms further enhances the mask-like character of the face.

The African masks and figure sculpture in Toledo represent many of the major traditional forms produced by the tribes living in western Africa south of the Sahara. In this publication, they are arranged in geographical sequence from west to east under the present-day names of their respective countries.



Tribes Represented In
The Toledo Collection:

- ① Mende
- ② Dan
- ③ Senufo
- ④ Guro
- ⑤ Baule
- ⑥ Yoruba
- ⑦ Beni
- ⑧ Bangwa
- ⑨ Fang
- ⑩ Bakota
- ⑪ Bushongo
- ⑫ Basonge



SIERRA LEONE

2. *Gongole Mask*
Wood with applied and incised metal sheets
Mende Tribe, Sierra Leone
Ht. 20 in. (50.8 cm.)
64.55

Unlike most African masks, Gongole masks were not used in religious rituals. Gongole dancers of the Mende tribe performed purely for entertainment. They appeared during solemn rituals to relieve tension and to amuse. Because of this, Gongole masks are often imaginative and humorous. The costume worn with them was made of long raffia which covered the body of the dancer and swayed with his movements. The holes drilled along the neck opening of the mask show where this costume was attached.

LIBERIA

3. Mask of the Poro Secret Society
Wood
Dan Tribe, Geh Subgroup, Liberia
Ht. 21 in. (53.3 cm.)
70.17

The main tribal society of the Dan tribe, located in eastern Liberia and western Ivory Coast, is the Poro Secret Society, to which all adult males belong. The society maintains social and political equilibrium within the tribe. This particular mask, with its pronounced vertical nose and beak-like form below its chin, is characteristic of the masks worn by Poro Society members who acted within the Geh subgroup as debt collectors.

When wearing such a mask, the owner lost his personal identity in the eyes of the tribe. He became a feared and respected arbiter of debt claims. After deliberation, the judge wearing the mask pronounced upon the validity of the debt. He then commanded payment of just debts in the tribal currency or goods of comparable value. Tribal fear of the power of the mask assured that its dicta would be followed.



IVORY COAST



4. Mask of the Poro Secret Society
Wood with polychrome decoration
Dan Tribe, Ivory Coast
Ht. 14 in. (35.6 cm.)
70.46

Within the Dan tribe, the Poro Secret Society functioned as a tribal authority maintaining social control. In this role, members of the society supervised and preserved tribal institutions and traditions such as the rites of initiation of youths coming of age. The presence of such an arbitrating group can be understood in the absence of any other recognized social authority. Each village had its Zo, the local head of the Poro Society, who wore a mask such as this.

5. *Helmet Mask*
Wood
Senufo Tribe, Ivory Coast
Ht. 34 in. (86.3 cm.)
73.9



This mask represents a mythological creature believed to protect the tribal community from sorcerers and soul stealers. The fanciful combination of several animal characteristics—hyena jaws, warhog tusks and antelope horns—is intended to recall the chaos before the world was set in order. Between the horns at the crown of the head are a

chameleon and a hornbill, two creatures believed by the tribe to have survived from primordial times.

Because these masks appeared in groups after dark and were made to appear to spit fire from their mouths, they have come to be known outside of Africa as “fire spitters”.



IVORY COAST

6. Mask
Wood with polychrome paint
Guro Tribe, Die Subtribe, Ivory Coast
Ht. 12¼ in. (31.1 cm.)
70.16

The small size, linear elegance, and the collar-like framing device of this mask is typical of the mask style of the Guro tribe. The severe stylization of the human face and the flat, linear patterns are qualities which appear in the work of such European artists as Modigliani.

Masks of this type, with black or brown polished surfaces and painted details such as the hairline, scarification mark and the mouth, are called *mblo* throughout West Africa. They are worn by societies with social-political functions in the villages. The specific function of each type of mask is not known, although it is thought that they embody tenets of tribal mythology.

7. Mask

Wood with metal plates, metal tacks and painted decoration

Baule Tribe, Yaure Subtribe, Region of Bouaffle, Ivory Coast

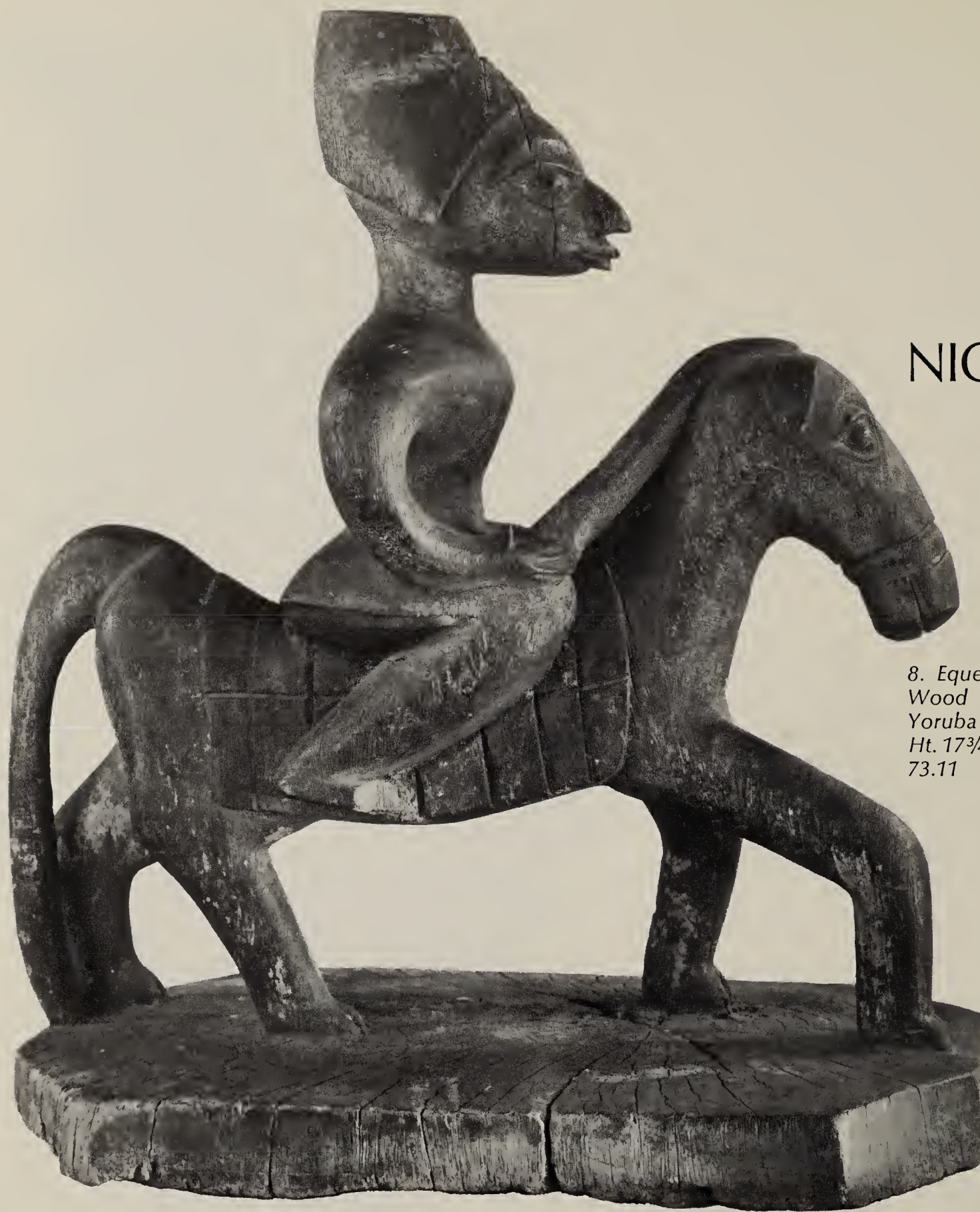
Ht. 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (45.1 cm.)

73.12

Until the 18th century the Baule tribe lived in modern Ghana as a part of the Akan tribal group. In 1730, the Baule broke away from this group and moved into the western Ivory Coast, where they came in contact with the Guro tribe, from whose mask style they borrowed heavily. A comparison of the hairline and eye treatment of this mask with the Guro example opposite shows their close relationship.

This mask is typical of the mask style of the Yaure, a subtribe of the Baule. It is distinguished from Guro masks by its round, rather elongated face and by the abstract superstructure over the head. Like the Guro mask, this *mblo* mask had a social-political function. It represents one of the mythological, primeval beings believed by the tribe to be the world's creators. This mask represents the wind god, *Gu*, blowing through pursed lips and thus turning the world.





NIGERIA

8. *Equestrian Figure*
Wood
Yoruba Tribe, Nigeria
Ht. 17³/₄ in. (45.1 cm.)
73.11

Carved from a single block of wood, this figure represents an impressive technical achievement. The sculptor has exaggerated and abbreviated natural appearances to produce an expressive and forceful figure.

In an agrarian society, horses and cattle were of paramount importance to the survival of the village. Only royalty could use such highly prized

creatures as horses for transportation. Therefore, only a deity, a king or a venerated ancestor could be represented on horseback. This particular statue probably was used as an altar figure in the king's residence.

9. *Gelede Society Mask*
Wood with polychrome decoration
Yoruba Tribe, Nigeria
Ht. 20 in. (50.8 cm.)
70.52



Typical of the art of the Yoruba in the area near the town of Meko in southwest Nigeria, this Gelede Society mask illustrates the activities of the village blacksmith, whose work involved what the tribe considered mysterious manipulations of heat and cold to produce metal.

The structure above the face gives an impression of the regional architecture, with massive, carved

wood posts supporting a tiered grass roof. The mask is decorated with several pigments, including a brilliant blue (a shirt bluing dye obtained in trade with Europeans), used to emphasize the scarification marks on the face.

The Gelede Society, found only in southern Nigeria, served to appease witches and to neutralize the evils of witchcraft.



NIGERIA

10. Votive Head of a Queen Mother
Cast bronze
Benin Kingdom, Nigeria
Ht. 18½ in. (47.0 cm.)
58.04
Ex. col. A. H. Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

Among the most outstanding African objects are the bronze castings of the Benin Kingdom, the earliest of which may date from the 10th century. However, it was not until the late 19th century that the western world became aware of these works, the first objects from Africa to have an impact on Europe. As many as 2400 objects were seized by the British Navy in the course of the Benin Punative Expedition of 1897. These were the first major group of African artifacts to come to Europe, where they soon found their way into museums and private collections.

This votive head of a queen mother was cast in the last quarter of the 19th century using the lost wax process and was probably placed on an ancestor altar in the house of the *Oba*, or chief. The tightly strung necklace of coral beads, the prominent scarification marks on the forehead and the beaded hairnet covering the conical hairstyle are all traditional symbols of wealth and beauty.

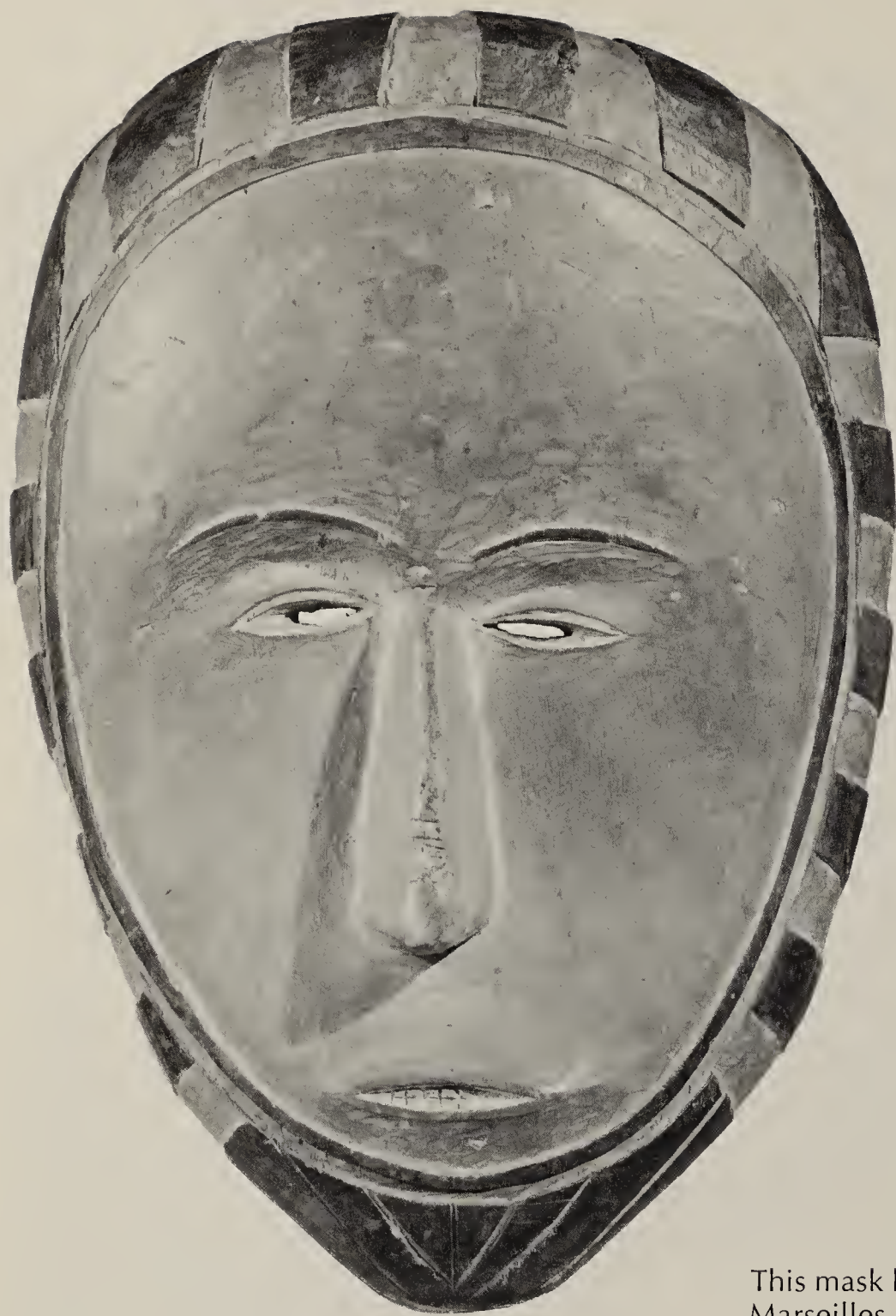
CAMEROON



11. *Mask of the Night Society*
Wood
Bangwa People, Bambalike
Cluster, Cameroon
Ht. 16½ in. (41.9 cm.)
70.19

Worn by the feared henchmen of the chief, Night Society masks were believed to endow the wearer with dangerous supernatural power. This mask, carved in the form of a baboon skull, is decorated with shapes which depict clusters of hair bound under knitted "caps", a hairstyle reserved for Night Society members.

One of the many duties of the members of this society was their position as tribal executioners. Under order of their chief, they would take witches and criminals away at night and hang them.



GABON

12. Mask
Wood, partly stained and painted
Fang Tribe, Gabon
Ht. 17 in. (43.2 cm.)
58.16

This mask has a distinguished history. Purchased in Marseilles in 1905 by the French painter Maurice Vlaminck, it is known to be one of the earliest examples of African art to enter a French private collection. The artistic influence of this mask can be traced in the work of Vlaminck and his contemporaries. Such masks, brought back from Africa by traders and sold as curiosities, had an immediate appeal to those French artists seeking new forms of expression at that time.

This mask, from the Ogowe River district of Gabon, probably is an effigy of an ancestor, for the face shows the remains of a covering of white paint, the color which in Africa symbolizes death.



Used to mark the sites in which baskets containing ancestor bones were buried, Bakota reliquary figures were covered with metal sheeting, a highly prized commodity. Double faced figures such as this one are rare. The convex side symbolizes the male and the concave the female.

The flat, highly stylized character of these Bakota figures greatly influenced European artists in the early part of this century. In 1907, Picasso did a series of paintings based on them, and Juan Gris made a cardboard copy of one in 1922.



13 and 14. Reliquary Figure
Wood with brass, copper and iron sheeting
Bakota Tribe, Gabon
Ht. 20 in. (50.8 cm.)
73.10

ZAIRE



15. Mwaash A Mbooy Mask
Palm leaf stalks, palm fibers,
raffia cloth, wood, beads,
cowrie shells and leopard skin
Bushongo Tribe, Kuba
Federation, Zaire
Ht. 21³/₄ in. (55.3 cm.)
73.13

The Bushongo, whose name means "they strike like lightning" (referring to the speed with which they throw knives), are the nuclear tribe of the Kuba Federation of central Zaire, near the Sankuru River.

The Mwaash A Mbooy mask represents Woot, a mythical hero, man's first ancestor born of God.

Woot married his sister, Ngaady Mwaash, and founded the royal dynasty. This type of mask can thus only be worn by men of royal descent. The tubular superstructure recalls the trunk of the elephant, a symbol of royal power. The various materials from which the mask is made, cowrie shells, glass beads and leopard skin, are in themselves symbols of wealth and royal power.

16. Mboom Mask
Wood with leather, brass, raffia
cloth, cowrie shells and beads
Bushongo Tribe, Kuba
Federation, Zaire
Ht. 25 in. (63.5 cm.)
70.18



Mboom was the mythical god who unsuccessfully vied with Woot (opposite) for the affections of Woot's sister, Ngaady Mwaash. Mboom thereby symbolizes opposition to royal power, and balances the Mwaash A Mbooy royal mask in initiation-rite dances. The Mboom mask represents the power of the common people which restrains the authority of the king.



ZAIRE

17 and 18. Kifwebe Mask
Wood with polychrome decoration and raffia
Basonge Tribe, Zaire
Ht. (without raffia) 23½ in. (59.7 cm.)
73.8

Carved from a single block of wood, the shapes in this mask thrust themselves dramatically toward the viewer. More than simple surface patterns, the painted grooves are closely associated with the volumes in the mask. The straight lines accentuate the direction of the crest-nose and mouth forms. The curved stripes emphasize the round masses of the protruding eyes and intensify the thrust of the mouth. This type of mask is among the most three dimensional of African masks worn on the front of the head.

These large and fearful masks were worn by the Kifwebe Secret Society, whose function was to search out and kill witches.





ZAIRE

19. *Fetish Figure*
Wood with metal, glass beads, raffia cloth
and animal horn
Basonge Tribe, Zaire
Ht. 41 in. (104.1 cm.)
70.51

Fetish figures, called *buanga*, represented an awe inspiring source of magic and power. Magical material was usually hung in bags around the necks or placed in the horns of such figures, which were carried in processions and placed on altars. Stains on the head are the result of animal sacrifices made over the figure.

